Yaoi

Yaoi (/ˈjaʊi/; Japanese: やおい [ja.o.i]), also known as **boys' love** (ボーイズ ラブ *bōizu rabu*) or **BL** (ビーエル *bīeru*), is a genre of fictional media originating in Japan that features homoerotic relationships between male characters.[1] It is typically created by women for women and is distinct from homoerotic media marketed to gay male audiences, such as bara, but it also attracts male readers. It spans a wide range of media, including manga, anime, drama CDs, novels, games, and fan production. *Boys love* and its abbreviation BL are the generic terms for this kind of media in Japan and have, in recent years, become more commonly used in English as well. However, *yaoi* remains more generally prevalent in English.

Example of shōnen-ai artwork, originally published at Animexx

A defining characteristic of yaoi is the practice of pairing characters in relationships according to the roles of *seme*, the sexual top or active pursuer, and *uke*, the sexual bottom or passive pursuant. Common themes in yaoi include forbidden relationships, depictions of rape, tragedy, and humor. Yaoi and BL stories cover a diverse range of genres such as high school love comedy, period drama, science fiction and fantasy, detective fiction and include sub-genres such as omegaverse and *shotacon*.

Yaoi finds its origins in both fan culture and commercial publishing. As James Welker has summarized, the term yaoi dates back to *dōjinshi* culture of the late 1970s to early 1980s where, as a portmanteau of "**ya**manashi **o**chinashi **i**minashi" (no climax, no point, no meaning), it was a self-deprecating way to refer to amateur fan works that parodied mainstream manga and anime by depicting the male characters from popular series in vaguely or explicitly sexual situations.[2] The use of yaoi to refer to parody *dōjinshi* is still predominant in Japan. In commercial publishing, the genre can be traced back to *shōnen'ai*, a genre of beautiful boy manga that began to appear in *shōjo manga* magazines in the early 1970s. From the 1970s to 1980s, other terms such as *tanbi* and *June* emerged to refer to specific developments in the genre. In the early 1990s, however, these terms were largely eclipsed with the commercialization of male-male homoerotic media under the label of boys love.

Yaoi currently has a robust global presence. Yaoi works are available across the continents in various languages both through international licensing and distribution and through circulation by fans. Yaoi works, culture, and fandom have also been studied and discussed by scholars and journalists worldwide.

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History and general terminology

The genre currently known as *Boy's Love*, *BL*, or *yaoi* derives from two sources. Female authors writing for shōjo (girl's) manga magazines in the early 1970s published stories featuring platonic relationships between young boys, which were known as *tanbi* (aesthetic) or *shōnen ai* (boy love). In the late 1970s going into the 1980s, women and girls in the dōjinshi (fan fiction) markets of Japan started to produce sexualized parodies of popular shōnen (boy's) anime and manga stories in which the male characters were recast as gay lovers.[nb 1] By the end of the 1970s, magazines devoted to the nascent genre started to appear, and in the 1990s the term *boys' love* or *BL* would be invented and would become the dominant term used for the genre in Japan. Although *yaoi* derives from girl's and women's manga and still targets the shōjo and josei demographics, it is currently considered a separate category.[4][5]

Keiko Takemiya's manga serial *Kaze to Ki no Uta*,[nb 2] first published in 1976, was groundbreaking in its depictions of "openly sexual relationships" between men, spurring the development of the boys' love genre in *shōjo* manga,[6] as well as the development of sexually explicit amateur comics.[9] Another noted female manga author, Kaoru Kurimoto, wrote *shōnen ai mono* stories in the late 1970s that have been described as "the precursors of *yaoi*".[10]

The term *yaoi* is an acronym created in the late 1970s[3] by Yasuko Sakata and Akiko Hatsu[10] from the words ***Ya**ma nashi*, ***o**chi nashi*, ***i**mi nashi* (山[場]なし、落ちなし、意味なし) "No peak (climax), no fall (punch line/denouement), no meaning". This phrase was first used as a "euphemism for the content"[11] and refers to how *yaoi*, as opposed to the "difficult to understand" *shōnen-ai* being produced by the Year 24 Group female manga authors,[12] focused on "the yummy parts".[8] The phrase also parodies a classical style of plot structure.[13] Kubota Mitsuyoshi says that Osamu Tezuka used *yama nashi*, *ochi nashi*, *imi nashi* to dismiss poor quality manga, and this was appropriated by the early yaoi authors.[11] As of 1998, the term *yaoi* was considered "common knowledge to manga fans"![14] A joking alternative yaoi acronym among *fujoshi* (female yaoi fans) is ***Ya**mete*, ***o**shiri ga **i**tai* (やめて お尻が 痛い, "Stop, my ass hurts!")[15][16] In the 1980s, the genre was presented in an anime format for the first time, including the works *Patalliro!* (1982) which showed a romance between two supporting characters, an adaptation of *Kaze to Ki no Uta* (1987) and *Earthian* (1989), released in the original video animation (home video) format.[17]

Prior to the popularization of the term *yaoi*, material in the nascent genre was called *juné* (ジュネ),[4] a name derived from *Juné*, a magazine that published male/male *tanbi* (耽美 *"aesthetic"*) romances which took its name from the homoerotic stories of the French writer Jean Genet.[4][18] In China, the term *danmei* is used, which is derived from *tanbi*.[19] The term *bishōnen manga* was used in the 1970s, but fell from favor in the 1990s when manga in this genre began to feature a broader range of protagonists beyond the traditional adolescent boys.[20] In Japan, the term *juné* would die out in favor of *boys' love*, which remains the most common name in Japan.[4] Mizoguchi suggests that publishers wishing to get a foothold in the *juné* market coined "boys' love" to disassociate the genre from the publisher of *Juné*.[20]

While *yaoi* has become an umbrella term in the West for women's manga or Japanese-influenced comics with male-male relationships,[4] and it is the term preferentially used by American manga publishers for works of this kind,[21] Japan uses the term *yaoi* to denote *dōjinshi* and works that focus on sex scenes.[4] In both usages, *yaoi* / *boy's love* excludes *gei comi (bara)*, a genre which also depicts gay male sexual relationships but is written for and mostly by gay men.[4][13] In the West, the term *hentai yaoi* is

sometimes used to denote the most explicit titles.[22] The use of *yaoi* to denote those works with explicit scenes sometimes clashes with use of the word to describe the genre as a whole, creating confusion between Japanese and Western writers or between Western fans who insist on proper usage of the Japanese terms and those who use the Westernized versions. *Yaoi* can also be used by Western fans as a label for anime or manga-based slash fiction.[23] In Japan, the term yaoi is occasionally written as *801*,[24] which can be read as yaoi through Japanese wordplay:[11] the short reading of the number eight is "ya", zero can be read as "o" (a western influence), while the short reading for one is "i".[25]

Concepts

Shōnen-ai

The term *shōnen-ai* (boy love) originally connoted ephebophilia or pederasty in Japan, but from the early 1970s to the late 1980s, was used to describe a new genre of shōjo manga, primarily produced by the Year 24 Group of women authors, about beautiful boys in love. Characteristics of shōnen-ai include exoticism, often taking place in Europe,[26] and idealism.[27] Jeffrey Angles particularly notes Moto Hagio's *The Heart of Thomas* (1974) and Keiko Takemiya's *Kaze to Ki no Uta* (1976–1984) as being groundbreaking, noting their portrayal of intense friendship between males, including jealousy and desire.[28]

The origin of shonen-ai is thought to come through two pathways. Mizoguchi traces the tales back to the *tanbi* romances of Mori Mari.[29] The term *tanbi* was used for stories written for and about the worship of beauty,[4] and romance between older men and beautiful youths[30] using particularly flowery language and unusual kanji (Chinese characters appropriated into Japanese script).[4] Mori Mari in *Koibito tachi no mori* (恋人たちの森, *A Lovers' Forest*), considered "the first work of [yaoi]",[31] used such unusual kanji for her characters' names that she converted to spelling their names in katakana, a script used to transcribe foreign words.[30] The word was originally used to describe an author's distinctive style, for example, the styles of Yukio Mishima and Jun'ichirō Tanizaki. Akiko Mizoguchi describes its application to male-male stories as "misleading", but notes "it was the most commonly used term in the early 1990s."[20] According to James Welker, Minori Ishida shows that "early boys love narratives" were inspired by European fiction about "beautiful boys", and the writing of the male author Taruho Inagaki.[29] Carola Bauer cites the *bildungsroman* genre as having influenced shonen-ai.[32]

Kazuko Suzuki describes shōnen-ai as being "pedantic" and "difficult to understand",[12] saying that they required "knowledge of classic literature, history and science"[27] and were replete with "philosophical and abstract musings". Shōnen-ai challenged young readers, who were often only able to understand the references and deeper themes as they grew older and instead were initially drawn to the figure of the male protagonist.[33] Galbraith defines *shōnen ai* as "original content that can approach serious literature in tone and theme", as opposed to a more light-hearted *yaoi*.[3] By the late 1980s, the popularity of professionally published shōnen-ai was declining, and dōjinshi (self-published) yaoi was becoming more popular.[8]

The terms *yaoi* and *shōnen-ai* are sometimes used by Western fans to differentiate between two variants of the genre. In this case, *yaoi* is used to describe titles that primarily feature sexually explicit themes and sex scenes, while *shōnen-ai* is used to describe titles that focus primarily on romance and omit explicit sexual content, although sexual acts may be implied.[34][35][36] According to this use of the terms, *Gravitation* would be considered *shōnen-ai* due to its focus on the characters' careers rather than their love life.[22]

Seme and uke

The two participants in a yaoi relationship (and to a lesser extent in yuri)[37] are often referred to as *seme* ("top") and *uke* ("bottom"). These terms originated in martial arts:[38] *seme* derives from the *ichidan* verb "to attack", while *uke* is taken from the verb "to receive"[14] and is used in Japanese gay slang to mean the receptive partner ("bottom") in anal sex. Aleardo Zanghellini suggests that the martial arts terms have special significance to a Japanese audience, as an archetype of the gay male relationship in Japan includes same-sex love between samurai and their companions.[38] The *seme* and *uke* are often drawn in the bishōnen style and are "highly idealised", blending both masculine and feminine qualities.[14]

Zanghellini suggests that the samurai archetype is responsible for "the 'hierarchical' structure and age difference" of some relationships portrayed in yaoi and boys' love.[38] The *seme* is often depicted as the stereotypical male of anime and manga culture: restrained, physically powerful, and protective. The *seme* is generally older and taller,[39] with a stronger chin, shorter hair, smaller eyes, and a more stereotypically masculine, and "macho"[40] demeanour than the *uke*. The *seme* usually pursues the *uke*, who often has softer, androgynous, feminine features with bigger eyes and a smaller build, and is often physically weaker than the *seme*.[21] Another way the *seme* and *uke* characters are shown is through who is dominant in the relationship - a character can take the uke role even if he is not presented as feminine, simply by being juxtaposed against and pursued by a more dominant, more masculine, character.[41]

Artwork depicting a seme (left) and uke (right) couple

Although not the same, a yaoi construct similar to *seme and uke* is the concept of **tachi** *and* **neko**. This archetypal pairing is referenced more often in older yaoi volumes - in modern yaoi, this pairing is often seen as already encompassed by seme and uke or simply unnecessary to address. The *tachi* partner is conceptualized as the member of the relationship who pursues the more passive partner, the latter of whom is referred to as the *neko*. *Seme and uke* is similar but not identical to *tachi* and *neko* because the former refers primarily to sexual roles, whereas the latter describes personality. Although seme and uke roles are already used in some manga to describe which member of the relationship is more dominant and which member is more passive, there are just as many manga novels which subtly or overtly differentiate between the two. A gay male who asks out another male can initiate the relationship but also enjoy the sensation of being a bottom in anal sex.

Anal sex is a prevalent theme in yaoi, as nearly all stories feature it in some way. The storyline where an uke is reluctant to have anal sex with a seme is considered to be similar to the reader's reluctance to have sexual contact with someone for the first time.[42] Zanghellini notes that illustrations of anal sex almost always position the characters to face each other, rather than in the 'doggy style.' Zanghellini also notes that the uke rarely fellates the *seme*, but instead receives the sexual and romantic attentions of the *seme*.[38]

Though these tropes are common in yaoi, not all works adhere to them.[43][44] Carola Bauer states that the "butch-femme" couple dynamic discussed above became essential in the commercially published fiction of the 1990s.[45] McLelland says that authors are "interested in exploring, not repudiating" the dynamics between the seme and uke.[46] The possibility of switching roles is often a source of playful teasing and sexual excitement for the characters, indicating an interest among many genre authors in exploring the "performative nature" of the roles.[36] Sometimes the bottom character will be the aggressor in the relationship,[nb 3] or the pair will switch their sexual roles.[48] *Riba*, リバ (a contraction of the English word "reversible") is used to describe a couple that yaoi fans think is still plausible when the partners switch their seme and uke roles.[47] In another common mode of characters, the author will forgo the stylisations of the *seme* and *uke*, and will portray both lovers as "equally attractive handsome men." In this case, whichever of the two who is ordinarily in charge will take the passive role during sex.[40]

Bara

Although sometimes conflated with yaoi by Western commentators, gay men's manga or gei comi, also called *Men's Love* (*ML*) in English and *bara* in Japan, caters to a gay male audience rather than a female one and tends to be produced primarily by gay and bisexual male artists (such as Gengoroh Tagame) and serialized in gay men's magazines.[49] Bara is an even smaller niche genre in Japan than yaoi manga.[50] Considered a subgenre of seijin (men's erotica) for gay males, bara more closely resembles comics for men (seinen) rather than comics written for female readers (shōjo/josei). Few titles have been licensed or scanlated for English-language markets.[50]

Bara does not aim to recreate the heteronormative gender roles between the masculine seme and feminine uke types prominent in yaoi that is generally for a female audience. Gay men's manga is unlikely to contain scenes of "uncontrollable weeping or long introspective pauses";[51] and is less likely than yaoi to "build up a strong sense of character" before sex scenes occur.[52] The men in bara comics are more likely to be stereotypically masculine in behaviour and are illustrated as "hairy, very muscular, or [having] a

few excess pounds"[51] akin to beefcakes or bears in gay culture. While bara usually features gay romanticism and adult content, sometimes of a violent or exploitative nature, it often explores real-world or autobiographical themes and acknowledges the taboo nature of homosexuality in Japan

The *gachi muchi* ("muscley-chubby") subgenre of boys' love, also termed *bara* among English-speaking fans,[53] represents a crossover between *bara* and *yaoi*, with considerable overlap of writers, artists and art styles. This emergent *boys' love* subgenre, while still marketed primarily to women, depicts more masculine body types and is more likely to be written by gay male authors and artists; it is also thought to attract a large crossover gay male audience.[54] Prior to the development of gachi muchi, the greatest overlap between yaoi and bara authors was in BDSM-themed publications[53] such as *Zettai Reido*, a yaoi anthology magazine which had a number of openly male contributors.[15] Several female yaoi authors who have done BDSM-themed yaoi have been recruited to contribute stories to BDSM-themed bara anthologies or special issues.[53]

Thematic elements

Diminished female characters

Female characters often have very minor roles in yaoi, or are absent altogether.[55][56] Suzuki notes that mothers in particular are portrayed in a negative light, as in *Zetsuai 1989* when the main character as a child witnesses his mother murdering his father. Suzuki suggests this is because the character and reader alike are seeking to substitute the absence of unconditional maternal love with the "forbidden" all-consuming love presented in yaoi.[57] Nariko Enomoto, a yaoi author, states that when women are depicted in yaoi, "it can't help but become weirdly real".[58] When fans produce yaoi from series that contain female characters, such as *Gundam Wing*,[59] the female's role is typically either minimized or the character is killed off.[56] Yukari Fujimoto states of shōnen manga series used as inspiration for yaoi that "it seems that yaoi readings and likeable female characters are mutually exclusive".[60]

Early shōnen-ai and yaoi have been regarded as misogynistic, but Lunsing notes a decrease in misogynistic comments from characters and regards the development of the *yuri* genre as reflecting a reduction of internal misogyny.[15] Alternatively, yaoi fandom is also viewed as a "refuge" from mainstream culture, which in this paradigm is viewed as inherently misogynistic.[61] In recent years, it has become more popular to have a female character supporting the couple.[62] Yaoi author Fumi Yoshinaga usually includes at least one sympathetic female character in her works.[63] There are many female characters in Yaoi who are Fujoshi themselves.

Gay equality

Yaoi stories are often stronglyhomosocial, which gives the men freedom to bond with each other and to pursue shared goals together, as in dojinshi representations of *Captain Tsubasa*, or to rival each other, as in *Haru wo Daiteita*. This spiritual bond and equal partnership overcomes the male-female power hierarchy.[64] To be together, many couples depicted in conventional yaoi stories must overcome obstacles that are often emotional or psychological rather than physical. The theme of the protagonists' victory in yaoi has been compared favourably to Western fairy tales, as the latter intends to enforce the status quo, but yaoi is "about desire" and seeks "to explore, not circumscribe, possibilities."[65] Akiko Mizoguchi noted that while homosexuality is sometimes still depicted as "shameful" to heighten dramatic tension, yaoi has increasingly featured stories of coming out and the characters' gradual acceptance within the wider community, such as *Brilliant Blue*. Mizoguchi remarked that yaoi presents a far more gay-friendly depiction of Japanese society, which she contends is a form of activism among yaoi authors.[66] Some longer-form stories, such as *FAKE* and *Kizuna*, depict the couple moving in together and adopting.[67]

Although gay male characters are empowered in yaoi manga, yaoi manga rarely explicitly addresses the reality of homophobia in Japanese society. According to Hisako Miyoshi, vice editor-in-chief for Libre Publishing, while earlier yaoi focused "more on the homosexual way of life from a realistic perspective", over time the genre has become less realistic and more comedic, and the stories are "simply for entertainment".[68] Yaoi manga often have fantastical, historical or futuristic settings, and many fans consider the genre to be an "escapist fantasy".[69] Homophobia, when it is presented as an issue at all,[43] is used as a plot device to "heighten the drama",[70] or to show the purity of the leads' love. Matt Thorn has suggested that readers of the yaoi genre, which primarily features

romantic narratives, may be turned off by strong political themes such as homophobia.[8] Makoto Tateno stated her scepticism that a focus on real gay issues will "[become] a trend, because girls like fiction more than realism."[71] Alan Williams argues that the lack of a gay identity in yaoi is due to yaoi being postmodernist.[72]

Rape

Rape fantasy is a theme commonly found in yaoi manga.[64] Anal intercourse is understood as a means of expressing commitment to a partner, and in yaoi, the "apparent violence" of rape is transformed into a "measure of passion". While Japanese society often shuns or looks down upon women who are raped in reality, the yaoi genre depicts men who are raped as still "imbued with innocence" and are typically still loved by their rapists after the act, a trope that may have originated with *Kaze to Ki no Uta*.[73] Rape scenes in yaoi are rarely presented as crimes with an assaulter and a victim: scenes where a seme rapes an uke are not depicted as symptomatic of the "disruptive sexual/violent desires" of the seme, but instead are a signifier of the "uncontrollable love" felt by a seme for an uke. Such scenes are often a plot device used to make the uke see the seme as more than just a good friend and typically result in the uke falling in love with the seme.[64] Rape fantasy themes explore the protagonist's lack of responsibility in sex, leading to the narrative climax of the story, where "the protagonist takes responsibility for his own sexuality".[74]

The 2003–2005 *Under Grand Hotel*, set in a men's prison, has been praised for showing a more realistic depiction of rape.[75] Authors such as Fusanosuke Inariya (of *Maiden Rose* fame) utilize rape not as the traditional romantic catalyst, but as a tragic dramatic plot element, rendering her stories a subversion of contemporary tropes that reinforce and reflect older tropes such as the prevalence of romantic tragedy themes. Other yaoi tend to depict a relationship that begins as non-consensual and evolves into a consensual relationship. However, Fusanosuke's stories are ones where the characters' relationship begins as consensual and devolves into non-consensual, often due to external societal pressures that label the character's gay relationship as deviant. Her stories are still characterized by fantasy yet they do brutally and realistically illustrate scenes of sexual assault between characters.[76]

Tragedy

Juné stories with suicide endings were popular,[77] as was "watching men suffer".[78] Matt Thorn theorizes that depicting abuse in yaoi is a way for some readers of yaoi to "come to terms with their own experiences of abuse".[8] By the mid-1990s the fashion was for happy endings.[77] When tragic endings are shown, the cause is not infidelity, but "the cruel and intrusive demands of an uncompromising outside world."[79]

Publishing

Japan

Books on display at a San Francisco Kinokuniya bookstore

As of 1990, seven Japanese publishers included BL content in their offerings - which kickstarted the commercial publishing market of the genre.[45] By 2003, 3.8% of weekly manga magazines were dedicated to BL.[3] A 2008 assessment estimated that the Japanese commercial yaoi market grossed approximately 12 billion yen annually, with novel sales generating 250 million yen per month, manga generating 400 million yen per month, CDs generating 180 million yen per month, and video games generating 160 million yen per month. As of this time, magazines for BL included BE-BOY, GUSH, CHARA and CIEL.[80] A 2010 report estimated that the yaoi market was worth approximately 21.3 billion yen in both 2009 and 2010.[81]

Besides manga and anime, there are also Boys' Love (BL) games (also known as yaoi games), usually consisting of visual novels or H games oriented around male homosexual couples for the female market. The defining factor is that both the playable character(s) and possible objects of affection are male. As with yaoi manga, the major market is assumed to be female. Games aimed at a homosexual male audience may be referred to as *bara*. A 2006 breakdown of the Japanese commercial BL market estimated it grosses approximately 12 billion yen annually, with video games generating 160 million yen per month.[80]

English-speaking countries

Yaoi manga are sold to English-speaking countries by companies that translate and print them in English. Companies such as Digital Manga Publishing with their imprints 801 Media (for explicit *yaoi*) and *Juné* (for "romantic and sweet" *yaoi*),[34] as well as Kitty Media, and Viz Media under their imprint SuBLime. Companies that formerly published yaoi manga but are now defunct include DramaQueen, Central Park Media's Be Beautiful,[21] *Tokyopop* under their imprint BLU, *Broccoli* under their Boysenberry imprint, and Aurora Publishing under their imprint Deux Press. Yaoi Press, based in Las Vegas and specializing in yaoi that is not of Japanese origin, remains active. According to McLelland, the earliest officially translated English-language *yaoi* manga was printed in 2003, and as of 2006 there were about 130 English-translated works commercially available.[82] In March 2007, Media Blasters stopped selling *shōnen* manga and increased their *yaoi* lines in anticipation of publishing one or two titles per month that year.[83]

Among the 135 yaoi manga published in North America between 2003 and 2006, 14% were rated for readers aged 13 years or over, 39% were rated for readers aged 15 or older, and 47% were rated for readers age 18 and up.[84] Although American booksellers were increasingly stocking *yaoi* titles in 2008, their restrictions led publishers to label books conservatively, often rating books originally intended for a mid-teen readership as 18+ and distributing them in shrinkwrap.[31] Diamond Comic Distributors valued the sales of yaoi manga in the United States at approximately $US six million in 2007.[85] By December 2007, there were over 10 publishers in North America offering yaoi materials.[86]

Only a select few yaoi games have been officially translated into English. In 2006, JAST USA announced they would be releasing *Enzai* as *Enzai: Falsely Accused*, the first license of a yaoi game in English translation.[87] Some fan communities have criticized the choice of such a dark and unromantic game as the US market's first exposure to the genre. JAST USA subsequently licensed *Zettai Fukujuu Meirei* under the title *Absolute Obedience*,[88] while Hirameki International licensed *Animamundi*; the later game, although already nonexplicit, was censored for US release to achieve a 'mature' rather than 'adults only' rating, removing some of both the sexual and the violent content.[89] The lack of interest by publishers in licensing further titles has been attributed to widespread copyright infringement of both licensed and unlicensed games.[90]

Marketing was significant in the transnational travel of yaoi from Japan to United States. Due to earlier marketing efforts by distributors, yaoi has attracted a following of gay male fans in the United States. *Kizuna* (1994) was described by Phoenix-based distributor Ariztical Entertainment that specializes in LGBT films as “the first gay male Anime to be released on DVD in the US” to market it to the gay male audience.[91] Furthermore, a review of *Kizuna* was ran in an issue of the prominent American LGBT magazine The Advocate, released on February 4, 1997. The review, written by Cathay Che, noted that *Kizuna* was “the first shounen-ai animated series... distributed by mail order through the gay-owned company Phoenix Distributors.”[92] Che also described the two-episode OVA series to be “as accessible as the usual gay art house film is eccentric and experimental,” tying the animated series to the larger gay media library.[92]

Fan fiction

The Japanese fan fiction (*dōjinshi*) subculture emerged contemporaneously with its English equivalent in the 1970s.[34][61] Characteristic similarities of fan fiction in both countries include non-adherence to a standard "narrative structure" and a particular popularity of science fiction themes.[14] The early yaoi dōjinshi were amateur publications not controlled by media restrictions. The stories were written by teenagers for an adolescent audience and were generally based on manga or anime characters who were likewise in their teens or early twenties.[61] Most dōjinshi are created by amateurs who often work in "circles".[93] The group CLAMP began as an amateur *dōjinshi* circle who worked together to create *Saint Seiya* parodies.[94] Certain professional artists such as Kodaka Kazuma also create dōjinshi.[95] Some publishing companies reviewed dōjinshi manga published in the 1980s to identify talented amateurs,[34] leading to the discovery of Youka Nitta and numerous other artists.[96] This practice lessened in the 1990s, but was still used to find Shungiku Nakamura.[17]

Typical yaoi dōjinshi features male-male pairings from non-romantic manga and anime. Much of the material derives from male-oriented shōnen and seinen works which contain close male-male friendships and are perceived by fans to imply elements of homoeroticism,[8] such as with *Captain Tsubasa*[13] and *Saint Seiya*, two titles which popularized yaoi in the 1980s.[61] *Weekly Shonen Jump* is known to have a large female readership who engage in yaoi readings.[97] Publishers of shōnen manga may create

"homoerotic-themed" merchandise as fan service to their BL fans.[98] Comiket's co-founder Yoshihiro Yonezawa described dōjinshi as akin to "girls playing with dolls";[42] yaoi fans may ship any male-male pairing, sometimes pairing off a favourite character, or creating a story about two original male characters and incorporating established characters into the story.[13] Any male character may become the subject of a yaoi dōjinshi, including characters from non-manga titles such as *Harry Potter* or *The Lord of the Rings*,[99] video games such as *Kingdom Hearts* *Overwatch* and *Final Fantasy*,[100][101] or real people such as politicians. Amateur authors may also create characters out of personifications of abstract concepts (such as the personification of countries in *Hetalia: Axis Powers*) or complementary objects like salt and pepper.[102] In Japan, the labelling of *dōjinshi yaoi* manga is typically composed of the two lead characters' names, separated by a multiplication sign, with the seme being first and the uke being second.[103]

While *Gundam Wing* does not have explicit gay romance content, its first airing in the North America via Cartoon Network in 2000, five years after its initial broadcast in Japan, was crucial to Western fan creation of yaoi fictions, as noted by McHarry in his article that performs a reading of “Western yaoi story” with ideas of gender theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve Sedgewick.[104] As yaoi fanfiction has so often been compared to the Western fan practice of slash, it is important to understand the subtle differences between them. Levi notes that “the youthful teen look that so easily translates into androgyny in boy’s love manga, and allows for so many layered interpretations of sex and gender, is much harder for slash writers to achieve.”[105] Regardless, the similarities and connections between yaoi and slash fan fictions should not be overlooked given the profound intersections between the two fan subcultures, as revealed by the multitude of *Harry Potter*-inspired slash fictions and dojinshi.

Yaoi-inspired works outside Japan

As yaoi gained popularity in the United States, a few American artists began creating original English-language manga for female readers featuring male-male couples referred to as "American yaoi." The first known original English-language yaoi comic is *Sexual Espionage #1* by Daria McGrain, published in May 2002.[106] Since approximately 2004, what started as a small subculture in North America has become a burgeoning market, as new publishers began producing female-oriented male/male erotic comics and manga from creators outside Japan.[107] Because creators from all parts of the globe are published in these works, the term *American yaoi* fell out of use and were replaced by terms like 'Original English Language yaoi"[108] and "Global Yaoi".[109]

The term *global yaoi* was coined by creators and newsgroups that wanted to distinguish the Asian specific content known as *yaoi*, from the original English content.[110][111] *Global BL* was shortened by comics author Tina Anderson in interviews and on her blog to the acronym *GloBL*.[112] High-Volume North American publishers of 'Global BL' are Yaoi Press,[113] which continues to release illustrated fiction written by the companies CEO, Yamila Abraham under the imprint Yaoi Prose.[114] Prior publishers include DramaQueen, which debuted its 'Global BL' quarterly anthology *RUSH* in 2006,[115] and Iris Print,[116] both ceased publishing due to financial issues.[117] In 2015, "Tweek x Craig", a season 19 episode of the American animation series *South Park*, centered upon the eponymous characters objecting to being depicted by their female schoolmates in yaoi-themed illustrations.

In 2009, Germany saw a period of *GloBL* releases, with a handful of original German titles gaining popularity for being set in Asia.[118] Some publishers of German GloBL were traditional manga publishers like Carlsen Manga,[119] and small press publishers specializing in GloBL like The Wild Side[120] and Fireangels Verlag.[121]

Other successful series in GloBL include web comics *Teahouse*, *Starfighter*, *Purpurea Noxa*, and *In These Words* from artist Jo Chen's studio Guilt Pleasure, all three of which are also being promoted by Digital Manga Publishing.[122]

Yaoi is known as danmei (耽美), which is the Mandarin reading of the Japanese term tanbi, in Sinophone contexts. The first appearance of danmei in China could be traced back to 1998 under the influence of yaoi culture.[123] However, state regulations in China make it difficult for danmei writers to publish their works online. In January 2009, the National Publishing Administration of China updated its third list of banned online fiction, most of which was danmei fiction.[124] In 2014, Anhui TV reported that at least 20 young female authors writing danmei novels on an online novel website were arrested.[125] In 2018, a female author received a ten-year and six month prison sentence for breaking obscenity laws in China by selling her danmei novel *Gongzhan* (攻占) on Taobao, China's largest online shopping website.[126]

Demographics

Most yaoi fans are either teenage girls or young women. In Thailand, female readership of yaoi works is estimated at 80%,[127] and the membership of Yaoi-Con, a yaoi convention in San Francisco, is 85% female. It is usually assumed that all female fans are heterosexual, but in Japan there is a presence of lesbian manga authors[15] and lesbian, bisexual or questioning female readers.[128] Recent online surveys of English-speaking readers of yaoi indicate that 50-60% of female readers self-identify as heterosexual.[129]

Although the genre is marketed at girls and women, there is a gay,[82] bisexual,[130] and heterosexual male[131][132][133] readership as well. A survey of yaoi readers among patrons of a United States library found about one quarter of respondents were male;[134] two online surveys found approximately ten percent of the broader Anglophone yaoi readership were male.[31][129]

Lunsing suggests that younger Japanese gay men who are offended by "pornographic" content in gay men's magazines may prefer to read yaoi instead.[135] Some gay men, however, are put off by the feminine art style or unrealistic depictions of LGBT culture in Japan and instead prefer gei comi,[15] which some perceive to be more realistic.[13] Lunsing notes that some of the yaoi narrative elements criticized by homosexual men, such as rape fantasies, misogyny, and characters' non-identification as gay, are also present in gei comi.[15]

In the mid-1990s, estimates of the size of the Japanese *yaoi* fandom ranged from 100,000 to 500,000 people.[15] At around that time, *Juné* magazine had a circulation of between 80,000 and 100,000, twice the circulation of the best selling gay lifestyle magazine *Badi*. As of April 2005, a search for non-Japanese websites resulted in 785,000 English, 49,000 Spanish, 22,400 Korean, 11,900 Italian and 6,900 Chinese sites.[46] In January 2007, there were approximately five million hits for *yaoi*.[136]

A large portion of Western fans choose to pirate yaoi material because they are unable or unwilling to obtain it through sanctioned methods. For example, fans may lack a credit card for payment, or they may want to keep their yaoi private because of the dual stigma of seeking sexually explicit material which is also gay. Scanlations and other fan translation efforts are common.[137] In addition to commercially published Japanese works, amateur dojinshi may be scanlated into English.[138]

Critical reception

General

Boys' love manga has received considerable critical attention, especially after translations of BL became commercially available outside Japan in the 21st century.[8] Different critics and commentators have had very different views of BL. In 1983, Frederik L. Schodt, an American manga writer and translator, has observed that portrayals of gay male relationships had used and further developed bisexual themes already in existence in shoujo manga to appeal to their female audience.[139] Japanese critics have viewed boys' love as a genre that permits their audience to avoid adult female sexuality by distancing sex from their own bodies,[140] as well as to create fluidity in perceptions of gender and sexuality and rejects "socially mandated" gender roles as a "first step toward feminism."[141] Kazuko Suzuki, for example, believes that the audience's aversion to or contempt for masculine heterosexism is something which has consciously emerged as a result of the genre's popularity.[142]

Mizoguchi, writing in 2003, feels that BL is a "female-gendered space," as the writers, readers, artists and most of the editors of BL are female.[20] BL has been compared to romance novels by English-speaking librarians.[39][70] Parallels have also been noted in the popularity of lesbianism in pornography,[42][82] and yaoi has been called a form of "female fetishism".[143] Mariko Ōhara, a science fiction writer, has said that she wrote *yaoi* Kirk/Spock fiction as a teen because she could not enjoy "conventional pornography, which had been made for men", and that she had found a "limitless freedom" in yaoi, much like in science fiction.[144]

Other commentators have suggested that more radical gender-political issues underlie BL. In 1998, Shihomi Sakakibara argued that yaoi fans, including himself, were gay female-to-male transsexuals.[145] Sandra Buckley believes that bishounen narratives champion "the imagined potentialities of alternative [gender] differentiations",[146] while James Welker described the bishounen character as "queer", commenting that manga critic Akiko Mizoguchi saw *shōnen-ai* as playing a role in how she herself had become a lesbian.[147] Dru Pagliassotti sees this and the *yaoi ronsō* as indicating that for Japanese gay and lesbian readers, BL is not as far removed from reality as heterosexual female readers like to claim.[31] Welker has also written that boys love titles liberate the female audience "not just from patriarchy but from gender dualism and heteronormativity".[147]

Criticism

Some gay and lesbian commentators have criticized how gay identity is portrayed in BL, most notably in the *yaoi ronsō* or "*yaoi* debate" of 1992–1997.[15][30] A trope of yaoi that has attracted criticism is male protagonists who do not identify as gay, but are rather simply in love with each other. This is said to heighten the theme of all-conquering love,[55] but is also condemned for avoiding the need to address prejudices against people who state that they were born gay, lesbian or bisexual.[148] Yaoi stories (such as 1987's *Tomoi*[15] and 1996-1998's[149] *New York, New York* (ja)) have increasingly featured characters that identify as gay.[15] Criticism of the stereotypically "girly" behaviour of the uke has also been prominent.[44]

Japanese gay activist Satou Masaki criticized *yaoi* fans and artists in an open letter to the feminist zine *Choisir* in May 1992, writing that the genre was lacking in any accurate information about gay men and conveniently avoided the very real prejudice and discrimination that gay men faced as a part of society. More significantly, its portrayal of gay men as wealthy, handsome and well-educated was simply a vehicle for heterosexual female masturbation fantasies.[15][30] An extensive debate ensued, with yaoi fans and artists arguing that *yaoi* is entertainment for women, not education for gay men, and that *yaoi* characters are not meant to represent "real gay men."[30] As internet resources for gay men developed in the 1990s, the *yaoi* debate waned[150] but occasionally resurfaced; for example, when Mizoguchi in 2003 characterized stereotypes in modern BL as being "unrealistic and homophobic".[151]

There has been similar criticism to the Japanese *yaoi* debate in the English-speaking fandom.[43][152][153][154] In 1993 and 2004, Matt Thorn pointed to the complexity of these phenomena, and suggested that *yaoi* and slash fiction fans are discontented with "the standards of femininity to which they are expected to adhere and a social environment that does not validate or sympathize with that discontent."[8][155]

In China, BL became very popular in the late 1990s, attracting media attention, which became negative, focusing on the challenge it posed to "heterosexual hegemony." Publishing and distributing BL is illegal in mainland China.[156] Zanghellini notes that due to the "characteristics of the yaoi/BL genre" of showing characters who are often underage engaging in romantic and sexual situations, child pornography laws in Australia and Canada "may lend themselves to targeting yaoi/BL work". He notes that in the UK, cartoons are exempt from child pornography laws unless they are used for child grooming.[38]

In 2001, a controversy erupted in Thailand regarding gay male comics. Television reports labelled the comics as negative influences, while a newspaper falsely stated that most of the comics were not copyrighted as the publishers feared arrest for posting the content; in reality most of the titles were likely illegally published without permission from the original Japanese publishers. The *shōnen ai* comics provided profits for the comic shops, which sold between 30 and 50 such comics per day. The moral panic regarding the gay male comics subsided. The Thai girls felt too embarrassed to read heterosexual stories, so they read gay male-themed josei and shōjo stories, which they saw as "unthreatening."[157]

Youka Nitta has said that "even in Japan, reading boys' love isn't something that parents encourage" and encouraged any parents who had concerns about her works to read them.[158] Although in Japan, concern about manga has been mostly directed to *shōnen* manga, in 2006, an email campaign was launched against the availability of BL manga in Sakai City's public library. In August 2008, the library decided to stop buying more BL, and to keep its existing BL in a collection restricted to adult readers. That November, the library was contacted by people who protested against the removal, regarding it as "a form of sexual discrimination". The Japanese media ran stories on how much BL was in public libraries, and emphasised that this sexual material had been loaned out to minors. Debate ensued on Mixi, a Japanese social networking site, and the library would return its BL to the public collection. Mark McLelland suggests that BL may become "a major battlefront for proponents and detractors of 'gender free' policies in employment, education and elsewhere."[159]

See also

- Glossary of anime and manga
- Men who have sex with men
- Pornography in Japan
- Yuri

- Gay pornography
- Gay male pulp fiction
- Tokyo Metropolitan Ordinance Regarding the Healthy Development of Youths

Notes

1. Initially called *aniparo*, this term covered both male fans' work about female characters and female fans' work about male characters, but *yaoi* would be surpassed by *aniparo* as referring to women's fictions.[3]
2. First serialized in *Shōjo Comic* in January 1976, *Kaze* has been called "the first commercially published boys' love story",[6] but this claim has been challenged, as the first male-male kiss was in the 1970 manga *In the Sunroom*, also by Takemiya.[7] Matt Thorn says that *Kaze* was "the first shōjo manga to portray romantic and sexual relationships between boys", and that Takemiya first thought of *Kaze* nine years before it was approved for publication. Takemiya attributes the gap between the idea and its publication to the sexual elements of the story.[8]
3. This character has been called an *osoi uke* ("attacking uke"). He is usually paired with a *hetare seme* ("wimpy seme").[47]

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